



# Out of the Navy, Into Trouble

By Ken Testorff,  
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“He’s the last Sailor we would have expected to take the risks and chances he took that night. His record of service was spotless. He was a nuclear machinist’s mate on his first sea tour. He had made first class petty officer and was qualified as engineering-watch supervisor. He was leaving the Navy [*on terminal leave*] to return to college and was enrolled at Ohio State University for this fall.”

That’s how one shipmate described the 23-year-old victim of a near-fatal car crash just four days before the end of his obligated service. Now, the PO1 lies in a hospital, in a coma, on life support, and is paralyzed from the waist down.

What happened? The victim was driving in the wee hours one Sunday in June when he hit the 88th car in a 100-car train that was crossing the highway. There were no witnesses to the accident, and

no skid marks were left at the site of the mishap. The intersection was equipped with barriers, which lower when a train is within about two miles of the intersection.

According to the victim’s family, it is common practice for locals to drive around the barriers since they lower several minutes before a train actually crosses the intersection. They believe their son didn’t see the train’s unloaded flatbed cars because they were traveling at a high rate of speed, and they were not lighted. With the relative height of the tracks and the road, the headlights of their son’s vehicle—they believe—would have been above the level of the cars.

The victim’s vehicle actually hit the train twice—once on the front of the car and again on the rear after being spun. The force of the collision and the violent spinning of the car ejected the PO1

through the passenger window, which was lowered at the time. The passenger compartment remained intact; his injuries primarily were the result of being ejected and striking an immovable object.

The PO1 had been out that evening with his parents and later with some friends. Authorities didn't do a BAC analysis, but the friends said they hadn't seen him drinking when they were with him, and he didn't appear drunk. However, he had left a girl before the mishap occurred. Their discussion, which concerned the future of their relationship, had been somewhat emotional. The PO1's father said that, according to the girl, his son was upset but not suicidal or distraught.

The mishap report listed three root causes of the PO1's crash, which happened just one mile from his parents' home:

- Failure to stop at a train crossing, even when the barrier was lowered;
- Failure to wear a seat belt, resulting in ejection from the vehicle; and
- Possible use of alcohol, resulting in impaired judgment.

The report also suggested that a misguided sense of "freedom" after completing his naval obligation could have led the PO1 to do what he did.

The CO of the victim's ship has spoken with his crew several times since this mishap, primarily to keep them posted on the PO1's progress, but also to remind them of the dangers present when they make poor decisions. The CO has vowed to keep stressing the importance of obeying traffic laws to all hands, including the mandatory use of seat belts and the senseless dangers that can result from driving impaired or using poor judgment. ■

*As reported by Operation Lifesaver and the U.S. Department of Transportation, 3,077 highway-rail collisions occurred in 2002, the most recent year for which final statistics are available. Crossing fatalities that year numbered 356, with 998 injuries reported. The top 15 states in 2002 for crossing incidents also were the states where 67 percent of the fatalities occurred. Those states included Texas, Illinois, California, Indiana, Louisiana, Ohio, Georgia, Florida, Iowa, Wisconsin, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Michigan, and Arkansas. The setting for the preceding article was one of those 15 states.*

# A Matter of D

By JO3 Camy Thompson,  
USS *Theodore Roosevelt* (CVN-71)

“I was heading east on Interstate 64, just before the Chesapeake Boulevard exit, when I lost control of my car. I remember sliding, and the car then flipped over. I reached for my cell phone to dial 911—that’s when I realized my legs were on fire. I just dropped the phone and started to scream.”

That’s how a young Navy woman described her car crash in the early morning hours of Nov. 16.

A pastor who was on the highway that night and witnessed the event said, “We saw a fast-moving car traveling the same direction as us, and, as we went around a bend, the car just hit the wall and started spinning. It then flipped over the divider before coming to rest in the HOV lane.

“I ran across the road and saw that the car was on fire and that all the glass still was intact. By now, another passerby had yelled for me to get a bar and break a window so I could rescue the occupant. I ran back to my car and pulled a hammer from my toolbox.

“When I returned, I heard cries, ‘I’m burning, I’m burning!’ coming from the overturned vehicle. I jumped down over the wall and grabbed the two arms that were reaching out the window.”

About this time, a second man jumped in to help the pastor pull out the occupant. Just as they had freed her from the car, its gas tank exploded, throwing both men and the young Navy woman backward. The two men quickly got back to their feet and pulled her away from the burning vehicle.

“Once we were a safe distance away,” said the pastor, “we rolled the victim around on the ground and used a blanket to smother the flames. Then we lifted her over the wall to the many waiting arms, including those of an off-duty paramedic.”

For the next seven months, the victim was in the burn center of Naval Medical Center, Portsmouth, where she underwent many surgeries—nine in just two months.